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SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT PASS TO USAID/OTI (RPORTER)  
SOUTHCOM ALSO FOR POLAD

E.O. 12958: DECL: 10/03/2018

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [VE](#)

SUBJECT: ZULIA STUDENT LEADER MURDERED IN HAIL OF BULLETS

Classified By: Francisco Fernandez, Political Counselor,  
for Reason 1.4(d)

¶1. (C) Unknown gunmen shot and killed Julian Soto, a 31-year old undergraduate and president of the Federation of University Centers (FCU) for the autonomous University of Zulia (LUZ) on October 1 as he drove to lunch. The University Centers are influential student bodies in Venezuela's five autonomous regional universities with significant budgetary and spending authority. Soto was part of the student movement that proved instrumental in defeating Chavez' proposed constitutional reforms in December 2007. The high visibility murder of Soto was not a robbery gone bad although his death may intimidate other student leaders. Given the amount of money the FCU has control over, this may prove to simply be a bloody turf war. END SUMMARY.

#### IN THE LINE OF FIRE

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¶2. (SBU) Following an October 1 swearing in ceremony of new rectors at LUZ in Maracaibo, Soto and four other students were driving in a Chevy Trail Blazer when, according to media reports, a taxi blocked their path and two men on a motorcycle pulled up to Soto's car and opened fire. Two additional gunmen from a blue SUV reportedly joined the fusillade, shooting into the windshield at Soto. Student Hernan Chirinos sitting in the front passenger position was struck twice in the leg, but the three rear seat passengers were unharmed. According to official police reports provided to Poloff, 20 9mm shell casings were found at the crime scene. According to some of the Embassy's Zulia contacts, police are investigating Soto's involvement in a kickback scheme over student bus passes valued at over USD 250,000. Minister of Interior and Justice Tarek El-Aissami pledged a thorough investigation.

#### STUDENT POWER

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¶3. (SBU) Venezuela's five autonomous universities are training grounds for aspiring leaders from most of Venezuela's political parties. The students elect the president and other officers of the FCU in each university. Although publicly funded, the universities operate independently and student FCUs have wide budgetary and spending influence. For example, one FCU member at the Central University of Venezuela told us that she oversees the provision of 9,000 free lunches every day. Many of these same student leaders, such as Soto, were also responsible for galvanizing the population to join the opposition in voting down Chavez' reform package in December 2007. National Assembly president Cilia Flores appealed that Soto's murder not be politicized.

¶4. (C) COMMENT: At this point there is no evidence of direct BRV involvement. Finding the truth will be difficult because

of Venezuela's incompetent and corrupt legal system. END  
COMMENT.

CAULFIELD